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Chapter 8. "Breakout": Nakhon Pathom Hospital Camp

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Chapter 8: “Breakout”

Nakhon Pathom Hospital Camp

Nakhon Pathom was the massive 10,000 bed POW hospital camp set up by the Japanese in December 1943 to handle chronic and heavy sick patients “as a result of increasing international pressure.”¹ It was meant to be a model camp that would impress the outside world, especially the Red Cross inspectors from Bangkok, although no record has been found that the Red Cross was ever permitted to inspect this facility.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii was the I. J. A. commandant at Nakhon Pathom. Lieutenant-Colonel Sainter was the POW administrative officer, and Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Coates, A.I.F., the chief medical officer. Coates gathered around him at Nakhon Pathom many of the best British, Australian, and Dutch surgical and medical officers in Thailand. On 14 June, Lieutenant-Colonel Weary Dunlop arrived from Chungkai to join his surgical team.

In recognition of Dunlop’s leadership and organizational skills, he was given added responsibilities as medical economics officer, which meant that he had to find “sources of income.” This would involve the delicate task of negotiating taxes on the officers’ and the other ranks workers’ pay to fund hospital care. It would also put him in contact with the Thai underground that could supply the POWs with needed medicines as well as news about the war. This latter activity brought Dunlop under close scrutiny by the Kempeitei. During this time, Dunlop only occasionally took the chance of writing in his diary, and then only on loose sheets of paper that were immediately buried and subsequently lost. This accounts for the huge gap in his diary between mid-June and 10 November 1944.²

Among the medical orderlies Dunlop brought with him from Chungkai was Jack Chalker, who was to help organize the physical therapy regimen and continue his visual documentation of the extraordinary surgical procedures and medical equipment being devised to treat the sick. As he had done elsewhere, Chalker also documented daily life in the camp.



FIGURE 8.1 PENCIL SKETCH OF NAKHON PATHOM WITH PHRA PATHOM CHEDI IN DISTANCE. JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Visible in the distance from the camp was the gilded, towering Phra Pathom Chedi, the most sacred place in Thailand, marking the site where missionaries from India first taught Buddhism in the kingdom. When Chalker first saw it, he wrote, “this strange and wonderful *chedi* became a symbol of civilized existence for us and I longed to see it more closely.”³

Nakhon Pathom had been partly built by POWs from the nearby camp at Nong Pladuk in former rice paddy fields on the plains about thirty-five miles west of Bangkok. It was bounded on all sides by a slender bamboo stockade. As at Nong Pladuk, the long huts for accommodation had been built of wood with atap roofs and side walls of woven bamboo that contained hinged flaps that could be raised and lowered to let in the light and air. Wood had also been used instead of bamboo for the sleeping platforms and each POW was given a blanket. But this was as far as the Japanese largesse went in outfitting the hospital. Dunlop believed the hospital had been an afterthought on the part of the Japanese and would do many little good.⁴

Besides the POW hospital, the Japanese established a hospital for their own sick at Nakhon Pathom as well. It was separated from the POW compound by a high bamboo fence.

1944

“Without friends in Nakawn Patom a man must surely die”

With its thousands upon thousands of heavy sick and dying, Nakhon Pathom was a dismal place. Entertainment—a critical part of welfare rehabilitation schemes in other hospital camps—was practically nonexistent. Wim Kan, the Dutch cabaret entertainer, had been a patient in Nakhon Pathom since early May, suffering with persistent bouts of malaria. His recovery had been slow, but by 24 June he was giving his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. wards as he had done previously in Burma.⁵ In late June, Chalker recorded a “band practicing” as well as “small lectures permitted” in his diary. But it was not until 7 September that he reported a feeble attempt at a “Band Concert” during which the musicians could only manage to play three or four songs.⁶ A simple platform stage had been built on the edge of the football pitch to accommodate their needs. He also noted there was a full moon that night.⁷

The full moon Chalker mentioned was an auspicious one. That night Allied bombers passed over the camp as they turned toward their target, the nearby supply depot and engineering workshop at Nong Pladuk. Afterward, those POWs severely wounded in the attack were evacuated to Nakhon Pathom for treatment. Two of these were the entertainers Edward “Ted” Ingram and “Akki” (Basil Akhurst). One of the other POWs was Donald Smith. What Smith disliked most about Nakhon Pathom was its pervasive depressing atmosphere:

Try as we would, however, we could not make Nakawn Patom [*sic*] a really happy camp. The huts were comfortable enough, and we had little to do in the way of work. We had a greater supply of washing-water than we had enjoyed in Nong Pladuk, and the food had not deteriorated to any marked extent. But as time went by, more and more sick men arrived in Nakawn Patom from other camps, until finally the whole atmosphere of the place became irksome. There was a lack of purpose in the camp which sapped the prisoners’ strength. Some men even went mad, and had to be lodged in a special hut, barricaded around like a fort. . . .

The days dragged by into weeks, and I thanked God constantly for my friends.
Without friends in Nakawn Patom a man must surely die.⁸

Given this horrendous situation, why had no official concert party been organized to restore and sustain morale? There seem to be several reasons why this had not happened. One was the fact that most, if not all, of the POWs were “desperately sick” and had no time, energy, or willpower to organize such strenuous activity.⁹ A second reason may have been that an open-air platform stage during the height of the monsoon season inhibited performances as well as attendance. But the most important reason for the lack of entertainment in Nakhon Pathom had to lie in the policies of the Lieutenant-Colonel Ishii. Ishii was one of those Japanese commandants who did not believe it was appropriate for defeated POWs to be singing and laughing.

The original plan was not to have the POWs at Nakhon Pathom perform any work on military objectives, but following the first bombing raid on Nong Pladuk, those who were able were put to work building a high embankment with a dry moat inside the fence all around the camp.

“What a sing song!”

At some point even Ishii must have been convinced that something had to be done about the dangerously low morale problem in his camp because “light sick” entertainers began to arrive in Nakhon Pathom. On 22 September, Norman Smith, “Fizzer” Pearson, Eric Griffith-Jones, Nigel Wright, and Rob Brazil arrived from Chungkai via the relocation camp at Tamuang. Smith’s assessment of the entertainment situation in Nakhon Pathom was bleak: “There was a grassy area set apart from the huts which looked as though it might have been a football or hockey pitch from the shape and size of it. A stage had been set up at one end but there was nothing in the way of entertainment going on prior to our arrival. We soon remedied this but we didn’t have many performers at first.”¹⁰

As he had done in other places, Smith immediately went to work scouring the camp for musicians to form an orchestra. It would be early December before he had enough performers to form such a group. In the meantime he worked with whomever he found to give small musical presentations, one of whom was Len Gibson (last seen in *Frills & Frolics* at Kinsaiyok in February).

Earlier, Gibson and three other musicians had made an attempt to do something to change the depressing situation—at least for the two hundred men in their hut. Gibson on his camp-made guitar, Alec Hawes on his banjo, and a fiddler named Jameson got together to hold a “jam session” surreptitiously in Gibson’s hut: “The three of us started up with a medley of North Country tunes including ‘Blaydon Races’ and ‘Keep your feet still Geordy Hinnie.’” They immediately drew a crowd of entertainment-starved listeners, and not just from their own hut, but from the huts on either side of them.¹¹

At one stage I looked up and realized that some were on the roof and had lifted up the attap roof tiles so that they could observe the proceedings. What a sing song! What a wealth of willing talent kept the concert going and Jameson was never at a loss to fill in the gaps. The sing-a-long was a great success. In fact, too much of a success, and too loud. We failed to hear Lights Out and continued our raucous singing for an hour or so after. The Japs must have had enough. They

called out the guard and with fixed bayonets charged.¹²

Their audience scattered. Gibson and Jameson were caught and taken to the guardhouse where they were repeatedly slapped and interrogated. The Japanese wanted to know who the third musician had been, but they didn't reveal his name. They were then made to stand outside the guardhouse holding their instruments over their heads, the thinking being that this punishment would make them confess. It didn't. Just before dawn they were released.¹³

Wim Kan was, by now, working as a clerk for a Dutch medical doctor. He continued his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. wards in his free time, and on 26 October gave one of his lectures to the POWs in the insane ward.¹⁴

During the following weeks intermittent attempts at entertainment continued but had little impact on the overall gloomy atmosphere. Jack Chalker explained why it took so long in coming: "It was a difficult time—an enormous population of desperately sick, with the less sick official medical orderlies and helpers stretched to the limit. All of us continued to go down with malaria, dengue and dysentery, but despite this Theatre did emerge, patchy as it was at first."¹⁵

The Nakhon Pathom Concert Party

The I. J. A. Southern Army headquarters in Bangkok must have heard that all was not well in their highly touted "model" hospital camp at Nakhon Pathom, for on 1 December, Colonel Ishii was replaced by Group II commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Shouichi Yanagida, who was presently at Tamarkan. As he had done earlier in Takanun and Chungkai, Yanagida immediately set to work tackling the low morale problem in the camp. One of his first acts was to authorize a concert party and to have a proper theatre built.

From a close examination of a ground plan and setting designed for a show that took place in this new theatre in mid-February, we know that this theatre had a stagehouse with side and rear walls. It probably had a proscenium arch as well. But it did not have a roof. Robert Brazil, who designed the setting, pointed out that if it rained the setting had to be painted over again.¹⁶ With no permission given for artificial lighting, daylight would light the stage. The new Nakhon Pathom theatre would, therefore, resemble the first theatre at Chungkai and Nong Pladuk.

Lieutenant-Colonel William MacFarlane, Royal Army Medical Corps, was appointed Officer in Charge—Entertainments with the task of forming a concert party. He immediately set about locating would-be producers and a staff who could provide design and technical support for his theatre. Chalker remembered that it was not MacFarlane but the former Malayan geneticist "Nigel [Wright] and others [who] seemed to be the centre of influence and decision with Theatre matters."¹⁷ MacFarlane's responsibilities were administrative; individual show producers were responsible for the artistic side of things. This division would be fine as long as each respected the purviews and prerogatives of the other, but when those lines were crossed, there would be problems, as we shall see.

When violinist Henk Eskes and guitarist Jimmy van Lingen arrived in Nakhon Pathom along with other N.E.I. entertainers, Norman Smith's new "edition" of his "Melody Makers" orchestra became a reality. His ensemble now consisted of "4 violins, 2 trumpets, 1 clarinet, 2 guitars, bass, banjo and drums," which allowed him to intensify his "efforts in giving concerts and arranging small parties to sing and play in the hospital huts."¹⁸ Gibson remembered most of who these "Melody Makers" were:

The violinists were Captain [“Tug”] Wilson, Eskes and Sanderson.ⁱ The clarinetist was Captain Martin of the East Surry Regiment. The percussion was supplied by Captain Wheeler of the 148 Field Regiment. The two trumpeters were a Russian named Tebneff and an Australian. A Javanese called Jimmy Van Lingden *[sic]* played guitar and there was a banjo player known to all as Sinbad.ⁱⁱ

On the railway, Gibson had been part of an instrumental trio as well as a female impersonator in Charles Woodhams’ shows. This was the first time he had performed with professionally trained musicians.

Playing in the band was a challenge. I had taught myself the chords and this was the test. We gave regular concerts playing to large audiences. There was a good tenor who sang semi-classical songs and we had solos from different members of the orchestra. Eskes was a huge Dutchman who had broadcast and most of the others were professional musicians who had played in well known orchestras. [Nicholai Philippe] Tebnef had been a cadet in the White Russian Army. He had played in the band and when driven out during the revolution had to resort to playing for a living in Hong Kong. He became a British Citizen.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jimmy Van Lingden *[sic]* was a good guitarist with an excellent ear for chords. He was a small man and had a huge home-made guitar which he handled with expertise.

Sinbad was really Petty Officer Alec Hawes. He had a dark beard and always reminded me of the sailor on the front of the old Players cigarette packet.¹⁹

Another of the newly arrived N.E.I. entertainers was, in Smith’s eyes at least, “an extremely good-looking Javanese [who] could dance beautifully and was even more handsome dressed as a woman.”²⁰ Both Chalker and Gibson called this performer “Sambal Susie”—but this had become the standard Anglo-Aussie nickname for any of the sexy Dutch/Indonesian female impersonators in the camps. It was American POW Benjamin Dunn who confirmed the performer’s identification as Vilhelm Vanderdeken, the female impersonator who had starred in Norman Carter’s concert party productions back in Bicycle Camp on Java in 1942. “‘Sambal Sue’ always played the part of an exotic woman—and a good looking one,” he wrote. “A lot of guys whistled at him and he seemed not to mind. He even had a big Dutch boyfriend who was with him constantly.”²¹

Three former entertainers from Chungkai—Bob Monkhouse, Van der Cruysen, and “Lovely” Dunning—also surfaced among the patients in Nakhon Pathom and joined the concert party.

Musical Intelligence

Nakhon Pathom held a secret. It wasn’t only a POW hospital camp as the Japanese authorities had told the Red Cross in Bangkok. Inside the larger hospital camp was a very special restricted compound

ⁱ Jameson would have been the fourth violinist.

ⁱⁱ Norman Smith would have been the second guitarist.

ⁱⁱⁱ He was a member of the *Straits Settlement Volunteer Forces Brigade*.

reserved for the thousands of captured Indian soldiers who had been in the British Indian Army. They had refused to renounce their allegiance to Great Britain and join with the Japanese as members of the Indian National Army (I.N.A.). The POW administration believed that it was vitally important that they make contact with their commanding officer and thought this might be accomplished while one of their entertainment groups performed for the Indian soldiers. The Japanese, suspecting such a ruse, steadfastly refused to allow the band or the concert party inside the compound.

But when Len Gibson and several of his musician friends, who had formed a singing group calling themselves “5 boys and 6 strings,” asked the Japanese for permission to perform inside the Indian soldiers’ compound, the Japanese “listened to us and decided that we could do no harm.”²²

On the day of their scheduled visit, a British officer who had been in the Indian Army joined them as a member of their group. “It was ludicrous,” Gibson wrote. “Those poor Indians most of whom could speak no English sat while we sang such songs as, ‘The Boogie Woggy [*sic*]/ Bugle Boy from Company B.’” While they played and sang, the British officer got to exchange vital information with the Indian C.O. under the watchful eyes of the Japanese.²³

On 3 December, there was an air raid drill as Allied bombers targeted Nong Pladuk once again.²⁴ As before, those severely wounded in the attack were evacuated to Nakhon Pathom for treatment.

Wim Kan’s Comeback

Wim Kan had continued to give his humorous theatre lectures in the N.E.I. hospital wards. By early December he felt strong enough to organize some other Dutch/Indonesian performers and put on a cabaret—his first cabaret since Burma days—for St. Nicholas Day, 5 December. At the top of the bill as usual, Kan sang a number of songs, such as “Fairy Tales,” “Disasters, Treasures and Happiness,” and “That One Needs to Go into the Sack.”²⁵

This last song was a reference to the hemp bag St. Nicholas’ servant Piet carried to put naughty children in before carrying them off to Spain.²⁶ (It wouldn’t be surprising to learn that Kan’s version contained some pointed reference that it was time for the Japanese to be placed “in the bag.”) During the performance there were complaints from the Japanese that the audience’s laughter was too loud, so they toned it down and kept going.²⁷ Kan and his troupe repeated their cabaret on four separate occasions in the N.E.I. hospital wards.

On 8 December, the POWs were finally allowed to dig slit trenches for their protection during any bombing raid, even though the I. J. A. assured them the Red Cross had been notified that Nakhon Pathom was a POW hospital camp.²⁸ In fact, the large sprawling camp, clearly visible from the air in its former paddy fields, was never bombed. What really struck fear in the hearts of the POW administration instead was the sudden increase in surprise searches by the Japanese guards. Worried that their secret radio and contact with the Thai underground would be discovered, on 11 December, Colonel Sainter ordered their “dickey-bird” [secret radio] be “killed and buried as unhealthy and the men concerned [in operating it] to leave the camp.”²⁹

A Special Christmas

After the success of his cabaret, Kan started rehearsing with Henk Eskes and Jimmy van Lingen for Christmas and New Year’s shows in which he planned to sing some of his old Burma songs, such as

^{iv} A Freudian slip here.

“Normal and Abnormal” and “Christmas Letter.”



FIGURE 8.2. POSTER FOR DUTCH CHRISTMAS SHOWS.
H. FRANZ, COURTESY OF NIOD.

As the colorful poster for the Dutch Christmas celebrations indicates, plans were made to perform brief twenty-minute shows in four different sick wards, as well as for the TB patients and the insane. But a notice pasted on the poster in the lower left corner informs the reader that these plans were cancelled as Kan had been taken ill.³⁰ He had suffered a relapse of malaria and was sent back into hospital.³¹

Meanwhile, Smith and Pearson were preparing an original Christmas pantomime to open the new theatre. In the more accommodating atmosphere under Yanagida, the orchestra had help acquiring worn-out reeds for their wind instruments, horsehair for the violin bows, and strings for their violins and guitars from a concerned Japanese medical orderly who traveled to Bangkok on his days off and asked if he could help them with their equipment needs.³²

Also contributing to the revitalization of camp morale was Chief Medical Officer Coates' request that every POW in hospital receive something special in the way of a gift on Christmas morning. John Barnard, a member of Coates' staff, was one of those assigned to fulfill this request: "[W]e were able to make up a small parcel of cigarettes, soap and toothpowder for everyone. I even managed to obtain paints and make-up for the artists on the theatre staff."³³ A gift of another kind was a special touring show that traveled the camp on Christmas Eve and visited all the hospital wards on Christmas Day. It included "a Father Christmas, a Lord Mayor, two beautiful film stars and, of course, a fat man^{vi} [who] toured the whole camp . . . and visited those prisoners of war who were sick and unable to attend to attend the shows," wrote Ted Ingram. "The crowning performance was given beneath a blue sky and a scorching sun to the one and

^v Perhaps the most unusual assignment for Norman Smith and his orchestra during this time was playing for another of Yanagida's new camp "shape-up" schemes—a physical education program—that was initiated on 20 December. Gibson recalled that "Norman Smith was given an eight-bar Nipponese tune and the band had to play this over and over again. A Dutch POW, ex-school teacher, led these exercises from the top of a raised platform" [Gibson, *Memoir*, 11]. Down below on the parade ground, exercising with the troops, was Jack Chalker, who remembered that "occasionally the orchestra jazzed up the music Glen Miller-style, much to our delight" [Chalker, *BRA*, 106].

^{vi} As best Chalker can remember, this "fat man" was some sort of clown.

only leper case, who, although isolated from everybody, still received his own special Christmas greetings from the players.”³⁴

On Christmas Day itself, there was a race meeting midafternoon, followed by an “Open-air Concert (Band) at 5:30 p.m.” Later, at 9 p.m., a huge audience was seated on the ground in front of the new theatre for the premiere of Smith and Pearson’s pantomime, *Alf’s Ring*.^{vii35} With such a late starting time, Yanagida—assured that no Allied bombing raid would take place on Christmas Day—may have given approval for the use of artificial lighting.

We know very little about the content of this panto, except it included guitar duets between Norman Smith and Jimmy von Lingen; a sketch in which Jack Chalker played a vicar’s daughter once again, this time with Derek Hirsch as “Daddy”^{viii}; and an unnamed colonel with “a pleasant tenor voice,” who gave “a recital of settings of poems of A. E. Houseman [*sic*].”^{ix36}

This show marks Jack Chalker’s first appearance on stage since his brief stint at Chungkai. Besides his important work in remedial therapy and medical illustration, Chalker now became heavily involved in the shows as a performer and also behind the scenes in costume design and construction.

Following the performance, Smith and Pearson were invited to a party in Colonel Coates’ quarters. But after one taste of the colonel’s home-made brew, Smith excused himself, saying, “[he] had to finish some new arrangements for the repeat performance of the pantomime on Boxing Day [the next day].” But Pearson remained. In the middle of the night Smith awoke to find Pearson’s bed empty and went on a search for him. He found him in the cookhouse, “standing naked on the floor . . . being sluiced down by two of the cooks who had dragged him out of the cesspit where all the garbage was dumped.”³⁷ The inebriated “Fizzer” had lost his balance on his way to the latrine and fallen into a cesspit. As a dedicated performer, Pearson knew that “the show must go on,” and though he was “a bit under the weather,” he did not disappoint his Boxing Day audience.³⁸

One N.E.I. POW, Cornelius Evers, voiced his appreciation about all the Christmas offerings the prisoners had enjoyed: “Thanks to the presence of Wim Kan, our 1944 Christmas was the best we had as POW. A Casuarina tree had been rigged up and decorated as a Christmas-tree. Christmas carols were allowed to be sung and the various cabaret shows and pantomimes, put on by the prisoners, almost made us forget the strained circumstances under which we were living.”³⁹

1945

“Renewed Hopes”

Wim Kan’s anticipated appearance with Norman Smith’s “Melody Makers” on New Year’s Eve (that had also been announced on the Christmas poster) did not take place as he was still bed-down in hospital; nevertheless, there was music and singing, “with as much celebration as our meager circumstances would allow,” recalled Chalker, “and once more a year began with renewed hopes.”⁴⁰ He thought Christmas 1944 the “most enjoyable camp Christmas we had known.”⁴¹

With these holiday shows, entertainment became a regular weekly feature of camp life eagerly awaited by the men.^x After two repeat performances of the Christmas pantomime in early January, the next

vii Chalker identifies the pantomime’s title as Fizz Number One [Chalker, “War Diary extracts,” Sheet 3].

viii He had appeared with “Fizzer” Pearson in this sketch back in Chungkai.

ix Given these acts, it seems more likely that the first half of the show was a variety show and the second half was the pantomime.

x Benjamin Dunn claimed that there were separate British, Australian, and Dutch concert parties at Nakhon Pathom, but no reference has been found to an Australian concert party separate from the British. Since our main sources of information on the entertainment at Nakhon Pathom are Wim Kan’s and Jack Chalker’s diaries, the record of entertainment is somewhat spotty because when they were “indisposed”—back in hospital—there are gaps in their accounts. Variety shows with no producer attribution could very well have been Australian [Dunn, 139].

major production of the Nakhon Pathom concert party took place on 12 January. This was the performance of three one-act comedies, *Hayseed*, *Smack at the Blacks*, and *Baba Barbary*, directed by Nigel Wright.⁴² Wright now became the British producer-director for dramatic works in Nakhon Pathom.



FIGURE 8.3. SKETCH OF NIGEL WRIGHT. JACK CHALKER.
COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Chalker became a close friend of Wright's and drew this sketch of him. "We had amongst us a most capable and cultured man," he recalled, "a geneticist from Kuala Lumpur, who had lived in Malaya for many years, had set up a theatre group there and was an experienced actor and producer."⁴³

On 16 January the high embankment and interior moat around the camp were completed. What was worrying about this new construction was the fact that machine gun emplacements had been strategically located at the four corners of the embankment—facing in. Dunn believed this was done "for the purpose of keeping the prisoners from escaping in Thailand where many of the natives were quite friendly to us."⁴⁴ Fear of a breakout may have been one reason for the machine gun positions, but the POWs would eventually discover that there was another, more sinister, reason as well. Air raids occurred again that night.

On 19 January, three more one-act comedies directed by Nigel Wright were performed. These were A. A. Milne's play *The Boy Comes Home*, about a soldier's return from the First World War, Noel Coward's *Ways and Means*, and Stanley Houghton's *The Dear Departed*. Chalker and Brazil designed the sets.^{x145} Ken Adams played the leading female role of Olive in *Ways and Means*; Chalker, the part of "Masie, the maid" in *The Boy Comes Home*.^{xii} When the plays were repeated a week later, Adams must have been "indisposed," as Chalker took over the role of Olive in *Way and Means* as well.⁴⁶

"Fizzer" Pearson did not perform in these one-act plays as he had done earlier in Chungkai. On 23 January, he, along with other nonessential officers, was sent to the newly established all-officers' camp at Kanburi. But Norman Smith was not included in this draft. He may have been in hospital suffering from

^{x1} Wright had previously directed Milne's and Houghton's plays in Chungkai.

^{xii} There is no "Masie" in *The Boy Comes Home*. The maid's name in the script is Mary.

another bout of amoebic dysentery, although that did not prevent other officers who were too sick to be moved from being transferred. Smith could only have been held back with approval from the top.

New Faces

On 9 February, a new Dutch/Indonesian concert party gave their first show in Nakhon Pathom. We know little about this group, but what we do know is that Wim Kan was not part of it as he was still in hospital recovering from his latest bout of malaria. There was also a band concert on 9 February, but with Smith “indisposed,” Thomas Gray, A.R.C.M.,^{xiii} took over as the conductor.⁴⁷

During the next two weeks, audiences at Nakhon Pathom were treated to “A Musical Extravaganza”: *Greenwood Fantasy: A Tale of the Rhythmical Rascals of Richard’s Reign*, written in rhymed couplets by Francis Leslie and John Maddox. It starred Rob Brazil as Robin Hood and Ken Cornish Cornish as Maid Marion. Brazil thought Cornish “looked a ravishing young lady.”⁴⁸



FIGURES 8.4 AND 8.5 SOUVENIR PROGRAM COVERS FOR *GREENWOOD FANTASY*. PHILIP MENINSKY. COURTESY OF ROBERT BRAZIL AND JACK CHALKER.

Philip Meninsky produced two different souvenir programs for the show. Among the many handwritten congratulations to Brazil from the cast on the inside of one of these are two couplets written in rhyme: a playfully suggestive one by “Merry Maid ‘Edward’” that reads, “Some call him Robin Good Fellow / I call him _____”; and the other, by W. G. Gillan, the actor who played the Sheriff, that charges, “I sought to kill you, Robin Hood / But now you’ve got me ‘in the mood’”—which sounds like a music cue, if you ever heard one.

Brazil was very proud of his work in this production:

I sung (or Robin Hood did) “Up a lazy river,” which went like this:

^{xiii} Associate of the Royal College of Music.

“Up a lazy river by the old mill run,
That lazy, lazy river in the noonday sun. . . .^{xiv}

Which makes reference (and a bit of a joke) to the River Kwai not very far away.⁴⁹

Besides starring in the show, Brazil also designed the unit set (see his ground plan and design for this setting in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”). A unit set was perfect for the limitations of their theatre. It allowed all the action of the play to take place in a single setting that could be easily rearranged or redecorated to suggest various locales.

Camp Update

At the same time that life in Nakhon Pathom with its steady supply of entertainment was becoming more livable, it was also, paradoxically, becoming more un-livable. Since mid-February there had been an increase in the number of air raids and, in consequence, an increase in the surprise checks that took place in the men’s huts day and night by I. J. A. guards searching for the secret radio they believed was transmitting signals guiding the Allied bombers.⁵⁰

A New Theatre

The big event at Nakhon Pathom in March was the opening of a new and bigger theatre, built, as the old one had been, on the edge of the football pitch.⁵¹



FIGURE 8.6. NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE. G. VOORNEMAN. COURTESY NIOD.

This new theatre, seen here in a watercolor by G. Voorneman, was a great improvement over

^{xiv} A Fats Waller song whose style Brazil liked to imitate.

their previous one because it allowed more flexibility in staging. It not only had a full proscenium-arched stagehouse but, in anticipation of the coming monsoon season, a pitched roof. No longer would the scenery have to be repainted if it rained. On the left side of the roof was a large hinged skylight—very like the “window flaps” in the men’s huts—which could be propped up to let the afternoon sun illuminate the upstage areas. Under the slant of the new wide roof were off-stage spaces as well as a backstage work area. Front curtains made out of woven mats were suspended from a pair of bamboo poles that allowed them to slide open and closed. The production that opened this theatre on 4 March was a “Naval Revue” entitled *All At Sea*. It was repeated a week later, followed on 18 March by a band concert.

On 23 March, P. G. Wodehouse’s comedy *Good Morning Bill*, produced and directed by Nigel Wright, opened for a two-week run. Wright had produced the play in Kuala Lumpur prior to the war and had made up this version from memory. Like all the prisoners’ scripts, it was “written out on scraps of paper largely stolen from the Japanese compound and the bits sewn together with salvaged cotton or wool thread.”⁵² Ken Adams, in the leading female role of Sally, played opposite Jack Chalker as the flapper Lottie. Costumes were by the Dutchman Fritz Meyer.

Chalker knew the play well. He had previously appeared as the maid Marie in Pearson’s production of the comedy in Chungkai. A brief excerpt from Act III in Chalker’s handwritten copy of the script will give an idea of the type of light comedy and cheeky roles that Chalker was good at. In this scene, the gold-digger, Lottie, has just been bribed by Sir Hugo with two thousand pounds sterling to give up any idea of marrying his nephew, Bill. As Sir Hugo leaves, Bill’s friend, the vacuous but filthy rich—and presently unattached—Tid, enters and learns from Lottie that she is not going to marry Bill after all. As the following dialogue indicates, she now sets her sights on Tid.

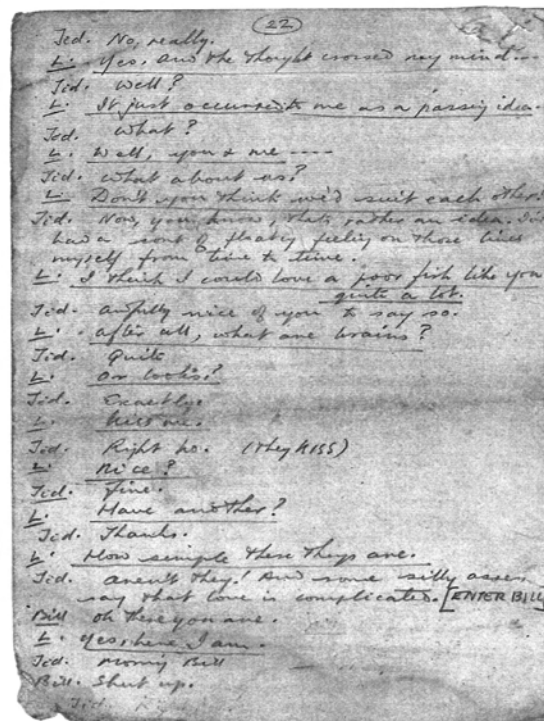


FIGURE 8.7. EXCERPT FROM *GOOD MORNING BILL*. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Stage directions call for the two characters to kiss—twice!—always a source of titillation as well as barracking in the audience. But it was nothing compared to the “stunning reception from the audience” Ken Adams received when he appeared onstage in a real pair of women’s silk cami-knickers.⁵³ (Read how these “unmentionables” were acquired in Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!”)

Ken Adams, who had first become a female impersonator in Charles Woodhams’ shows in Kinsaiyok, now became the major British female impersonator for “glamour” roles in Nakhon Pathom. Chalker described his appearance: “In looks he was taller and more heavily built than Bobby Spong and with a less immediate female face, but made up well and assumed female movement and voice pitch well. . . . Adams had a good sense of humour and took the ragging well that went on in a good-hearted way.”⁵⁴

Chalker himself became the choice for perky ingénue and feisty soubrette roles. Lieutenant Fred “Smudger” Smith, who designed sets and built props for the productions, remembered Jack as “a handsome chap with an aquiline nose & slim with quite a head of hair!”⁵⁵ Dunlop likened him to a young Rupert Brooke.⁵⁶ With his slender build and good looks, Jack Chalker finally broke free of his earlier resistance to performing as a female impersonator and quickly became one of the most sought-after players in camp. “It was great fun and the pleasure for me in doing it was in its barmy humour and burlesque,” he wrote, “as well as the challenge for all of us in making the almost impossible work. We were lucky—this helped us to survive, but with pleasure in doing it as a team.”⁵⁷

“Monsoon”

Earlier in the month, Len Gibson had started work on a challenging new musical venture. The coming monsoon season had reminded him of a guitar composition he had written two years earlier while working on the railway. He was now attempting to re-score it for Norman Smith’s orchestra.

At Wampo I had experimented with chords and rhythms trying to describe the coming of the rainy season. I was fascinated by the changes in the creatures of the forest; how they sensed the coming of the rain, and how the gentle breeze cooled us before lashing us with the torrent it carried. Sitting round the camp fire the lads would often ask me to play “Jungle.” I decided to rename it “Monsoon” and write it as an orchestral piece.

Before Norman Smith arrived at rehearsals I would take the opportunity to put a piece in front of some of the band and ask if they would play it to see what it sounded like. In time I had the orchestration complete.

It was with great trepidation that I handed out parts to unsuspecting players and had the temerity to say, “Please come in after the count of four.” I was not only the youngest but also the only amateur, but the band responded really well.

Norman Smith had heard the whole thing but kept out of the way until it was finished. He not only approved but rewrote all the band parts on good paper.⁵⁸

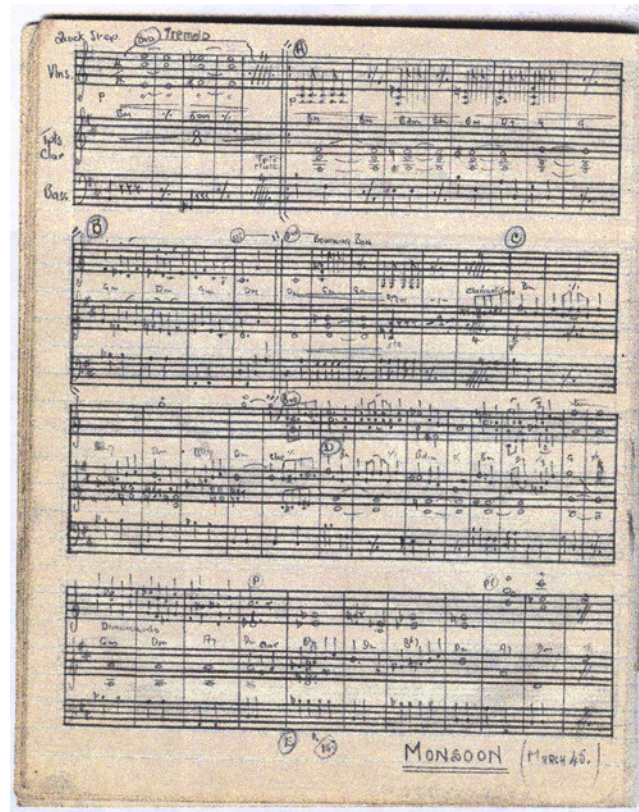


FIGURE 8.8. LEN GIBSON'S SCORE FOR "MONSOON." COURTESY OF LEN GIBSON.

[To hear an electronic realization of "Monsoon," listen to **Audio Link 8.1**]

Audio



8.1

Throughout the rest of his time as a POW, Gibson was able to preserve his precious copy of the score Smith had transcribed for him. "A vital part is missing [from the score]," Gibson wrote: "The Percussion so much depended upon the cymbals and drums for the storm climax, and the rhythm section for the repetitive beat."^{xv59}

Smith included Gibson's "Monsoon" in the next concert, on 3 April, and following its performance asked Gibson to stand up and take a bow.⁶⁰ This concert proved to be Norman Smith's swan song in Nakhon Pathom. As he had now recovered from his latest bout with dysentery sufficiently enough to conduct a concert, he was deemed fit enough to join the other officers at Kanburi.

During the next week there was a variety show (Australian?) and a daylight air raid that occurred during the noontime lunch break on 9 April. As a result, security around the camp was doubled. But it did not prevent the band concert from taking place that day, or the opening two days later of the musical revue

^{xv} Gibson followed this statement with a sketch of whole and half notes.

Café Continental, in which Chalker played Julia Gibson, the leading female role, alongside Nigel Wright, Bill Mercer, Bob Monkhouse, and Van der Cruysen. Chalker had now become a “hot property.” At the same time he was starring in *Café Continental*, he had started rehearsals for the comedy-thriller *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* and continued as a soloist with the band.⁶¹

At least one member of that band would soon be missing: Len Gibson. POWs who had recovered from their illnesses were constantly being sent back up the railway on maintenance parties. Some entertainers, it appears, were not exempt from these drafts. But Gibson and a group of other “fit” POWs were not sent back up the line but down the Bangkok-Maylaya Railroad Line to the new Mergui Road construction project on the Kra Peninsula. This road was being built by the Japanese as an alternative to the Thailand-Burma railway that was under constant attack by Allied bombers, in anticipation of their army’s retreat from Burma. During its construction, the POWs there would relive their worst “Speedo” experiences on the railway. Once again Gibson would do what he could in the circumstances to provide music to keep his own, and the other POWs’, morale high (see Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom”).

Wim Kan’s Break Out

On 13 April, the Dutch concert party returned to the Nakhon Pathom stage with a performance of Agatha Christie’s murder mystery *Ten Kline Negajes* (*Ten Little Niggers*).^{xvi} Wim Kan was not involved with this production either. While recovering in hospital he had decided on a new artistic venture for himself: playwrighting. Breaking out of his role as a cabaret producer-performer-songwriter, Kan started writing a series of plays, the first of which would be the comedy *Roland ons kind* (*Roland Our Child*).

The repeat of *Ten Kline Negajes* a week later was cancelled due to heavy monsoon rains, but a reprise of *Café Continental* was able to take place a week later, followed the next evening by *Cosmopolitan Way*, a band show, in which Chalker also appeared in a “Tea for Two” duet with medical officer Captain “Pop” Vardy. “Vardy was a popular and delightful man,” Chalker recalled, “and this was his first venture on stage to which the audience reacted with jeers and cat calls at his first appearance, and was great fun.” Another revival of *Café Continental* took place on 4 May.⁶²

After Kan completed the first act of *Roland ons kind*, he showed it to some Dutch friends and was taken aback when they criticized him for employing too highbrow a grammar and diction in the play.^{xvii} When he went to see Colonel MacFarlane, the entertainments officer, for permission to present his play, he heard criticism about another Dutch language issue. Complaints had been filed about the Dutch concert party’s use of their own language in their shows—particularly in their recent production of *Ten Kline Negajes*—as it prevented the British and Australians from enjoying the shows. So instead of receiving permission to produce his play, Kan met resistance. When he promised to present an English-language version of *Roland* two weeks after its production in Dutch, MacFarlane gave him permission to go ahead.⁶³

Noises Off: The Wider War

In early May, the British recaptured Rangoon, Burma, from the Japanese. On the other side of the world, 8 May was the day the Germans surrendered. The war in Europe was now over. At what point

^{xvi} Known as *Ten Little Indians* in the American version.

^{xvii} In an email to the author (24 June 2010), Dutch translator Margie Bellamy explained what Kan meant: “Like in England, the way you speak the native language in Holland defines which social class you belong to. . . and the cream of the crop went to Lyceum which combined Gymnasium (Latin, Greek in curriculum) and HBS [higher education]—these schools were for those classes which could think of/afford college education which is still only private in Holland. The difference in language is not only pronunciation, but grammar and choice of words.” By choosing this grammar and diction, Kan was indicating his characters’ social class. That he had chosen to write a comedy about characters of this class must have surprised his friends.

the POWs in Nakhon Pathom learned about these major events is uncertain since their secret radio was no longer in operation. And Dunlop's diary is no help here because there is another huge gap in it between 3 January and 6 July. But one can assume that contact with their underground network was still operating and the POWs in Nakhon Pathom did receive this heartening news.

"Trouble in the Works"

In Nakhon Pathom, Kan started rehearsing his comedy, although he had been hesitant about being a theatre director. Having seen Chalker perform, Kan asked him to play a walk-on role as a young English woman in *Roland*. He accepted.⁶⁴ But Kan soon discovered that rehearsing *Roland* every evening was tiring. He also realized that he had written a very difficult play for amateurs to perform. Nevertheless, warming to his newfound role as playwright, he began work on a second play, a one-act piece, *De Oude Mevrouw Duister* (*The Old Mrs. Duister*).⁶⁵

As the rehearsals for *Roland* continued, Kan began to experience difficulties with Frits Meyers, the actor he had cast as his leading lady—"Big misery with Frits Meyer. Endless, nearly impossible to untangle questions"—which forced Kan to consider a casting change. His decision was complicated by the fact that Meyers was also in charge of costuming. Nevertheless, he did what any producer-director has to do for the good of the show: "Result that Frits is thrown out of everything by me—much against my liking. . . . Lugt will now play Frits' role in *Roland*. Leeuwenberg, Jack Chalker, and Baar will look after the costumes. I wonder how that will pan out. Working on a new ending for *Mrs. Duister*."⁶⁶

The Two Mrs. Carrolls Incident

Elsewhere in camp, rehearsals were under way for a production of Martin Vale's 1935 mystery-thriller *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*. Back in April, Entertainments Officer "Bill" MacFarlane had decided to produce a show himself, and he had written out Vale's play entirely from memory. It was an extraordinary choice as five of the eight roles in the play were for women, which, in this case of course, had to be played by five female impersonators. And MacFarlane had taken the producer's prerogative of casting the show himself without consulting the director, Nigel Wright. Ken Adams was to play the leading role of Harriet Carroll while John Davis (Sally Carroll), Jack Chalker (Cecily Burn), "Lovely" Dunning (Mrs. Pennington), and Ted Ingram (Clemence, the maid) played the rest. He cast himself as the male lead. Nigel Wright and Bill Mercer would play the other male roles.

But with *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, egos and jealousies long kept in check finally gave way and tensions now surfaced within the British concert party as well. Chalker recorded the unfortunate incident:

Some of us will never forget the occasion when a high-ranking British medical officer, unbeknown to his colleagues, put a sick man on an up-country [maintenance] party for railway work out of jealousy for his outstanding capabilities as an actor and producer in the camp theatre. The officer concerned fancied himself as a playwright and his action against this gentle, erudite English scientist was incomprehensible.⁶⁷

Though Chalker carefully avoids naming names, it is not difficult to figure out who the people

involved in this pathetic incident were. What the conflict was about is not explained, although the charge, “fancied himself a playwright” suggests that it may have been with the script as MacFarlane remembered it. As a seasoned theatrical producer-director in Kuala Lumpur before the war, Wright may well have known the original and charged that MacFarlane’s memory of it was faulty. Chalker’s account continues: “The action was discovered by a medical orderly who knew that the victim was a friend of mine and I reported it in turn to our senior Australian doctors who were distressed and angered and at once took the name off the work-party list.”⁶⁸

The “senior Australian doctors” mentioned by Chalker would have been Albert Coates and Weary Dunlop. When the “officer in question” learned what Chalker had done, he confronted Chalker and threatened to put him on a charge for insulting a senior officer. Being the feisty person that he was, Chalker responded that he “would ask for a court-martial in the event of our surviving the camps and that I would consider it a duty to ensure that his despicable action was officially investigated.”⁶⁹

The Two Mrs. Carrolls was scheduled to open on 18 May when suddenly all shows were cancelled by the Japanese “owing to bad saluting: for 1 wk they were told!”⁷⁰ This meant the show would only have a one-week run instead of the intended two. As further punishment for the “bad saluting” incident, a temporary ban was placed on all rehearsals, totally upsetting final rehearsals for *Carrolls* as well as Wim Kan’s carefully planned schedule for *Roland*. A week later, a frustrated Kan wrote in his diary, “rehearsals still not permitted.”⁷¹

Once the ban was lifted, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* went on with no further complications, although the atmosphere backstage must have been frosty. Chalker designed the stylish women’s costumes for this production (see Chapter 12: “Jolly Good Show!” for examples of his costume designs and comments on their construction).

Hopes and Fears

With the lifting of the ban, Kan’s rehearsals resumed: “*Roland* again in the bakery!” he wrote in his diary, “Lugt practiced Lola. Not too bad, but he thinks it’s a chore!”⁷² Kan then added three intriguing notes to his entry: (1) that they were having lots of thunderstorms at night, (2) that the stage was being moved, and (3) that there were “endless difficulties” in the concert party.⁷³

The monsoon rains worried Kan because they could force a delay, or even a cancellation, of his show. Heavy rain also must have been the reason for the movement of the stage away from the edge of the football pitch to a spot where audience seating would be less muddy. But whatever the reason, it temporarily put an end to all the entertainments in camp until it could reopen.^{xviii}

Operating on faith, Kan continued his rehearsals, and an air of excitement pervades his diary entry for 10 June as his production neared its opening night:

We rehearse *Roland* every day; 3rd act especially good. Nice poster drawn by Jack Chalker. Hope to save it (light blue). Friday, one week from now, *Roland* has to open. Maybe the performance will be in the afternoon at 3:30. No rehearsals on the stage! It is getting more and more difficult. We miss Frits, but fortunately Lugt turns out quite okay. Rain every afternoon. The Englishman (Nigel Wright and others) often view my rehearsals.⁷⁴

xviii We don’t know whether the “endless difficulties” Kan mentions refer to those in his concert party or those in the British one.

And just as things were finally going along well once more, calamity struck. The stage on which they were to perform was suddenly no more. As it was being transported to its new location, it must have disintegrated in the heavy rains. So, “in haste,” Kan wrote, “a new stage is built.”⁷⁵ But this meant that the opening of *Roland* had to be delayed until 23 June. Then Kan learned that the new structure was not going to be ready on the expected date, so the opening of *Roland* had to be postponed once again, this time until the twenty-ninth. This delay would mean that *Roland* would only have a one-week run.

In the midst of his mounting frustrations, Kan started writing a new play, *Maatje Visser Helderziende* (*Maatje Visser, Clairvoyant*), which he characterized as “nearly a farce.”⁷⁶ Working hard during the next few days, he completed most of it. His anxiety about the opening of *Roland* (“Come hell or high water, Roland has to open on Friday at 3:30”) was finally relieved when the new theatre was completed ahead of schedule on 25 June. He was thrilled with the new structure: “The Japs gave us a beautiful new stage. With dressing rooms and all—nearly more beautiful than the Leidseplein Theatre^{xix77}

Also thrilled with this new theatre was Jack Chalker, who described it in more detail: “Though less picturesque in its setting [than] Chungkai, it was a more sophisticated structure built of bamboo and atop on a raised platform, with a shallow orchestra pit and equipped with dressing rooms, ample wings, and a drop-curtain of bamboo and ‘flies’ operated by ropes made of stolen hemp.”^{xx78}

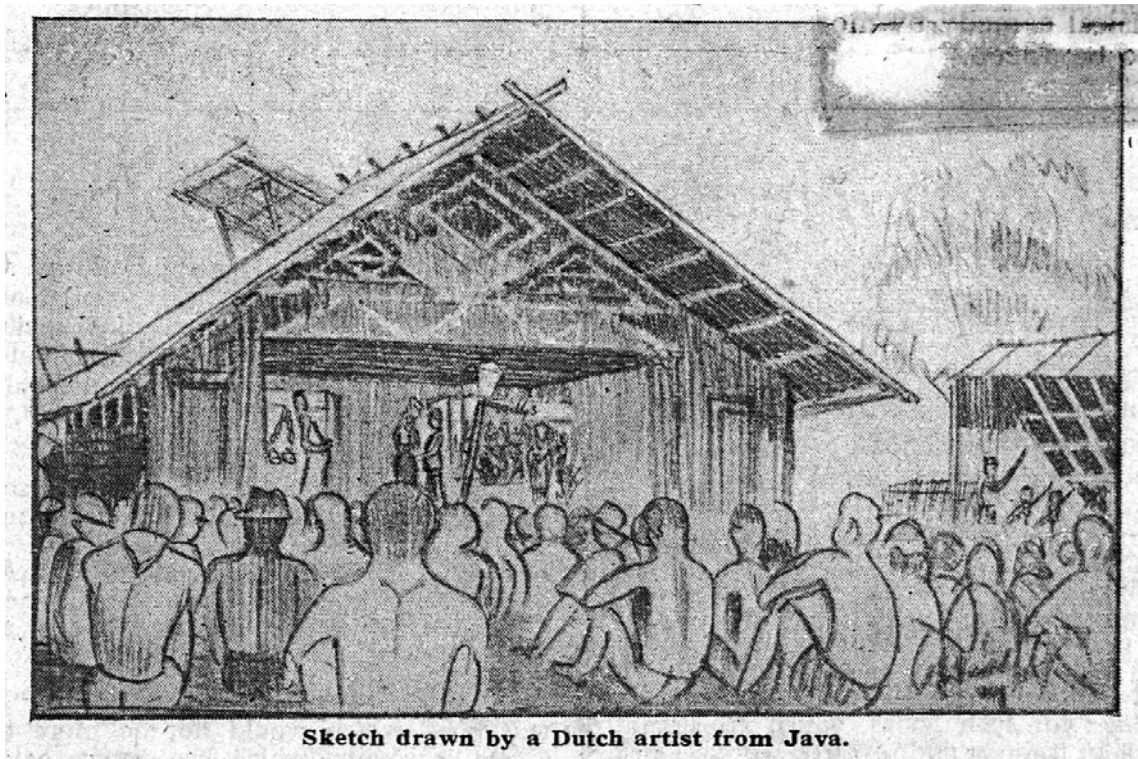


FIGURE 8.9. SKETCH OF NEW NAKHON PATHOM THEATRE BY UNKNOWN DUTCH ARTIST FROM INGRAM'S "PADDY FIELD PLAYHOUSE."

A sketch by an unidentified Dutch artist shows this “beautiful new stage.”⁷⁹ The pitch of the roof

^{xix} The Leidseplein Theatre was a small, beautiful theatre in Amsterdam. Kan's comment, “the Japs gave us,” probably doesn't mean that the Japanese actually built the theatre, but that they had provided the materials with which to build it.
^{xx} Chalker had apparently forgotten about the capabilities of the Chungkai theatre.

is now higher, which allowed a grid—visible in the sketch—to be installed so that small scenery pieces and drop curtains could be raised and lowered from the flies. The open skylight in the roof is clearly visible. Handsome diamond-shaped designs have been woven into the facing of the pediment over the proscenium header and decorative rectangular panels have been placed on the facing of the proscenium's side walls. Four characters are seen on stage, two of whom are female—one appears to be pregnant! There is also a leaning lamppost and an unidentifiable piece of scenery in the background.

There may well have been a shallow orchestra pit, as Chalker states, but the sketch shows there was a thatched lean-to structure at audience right that housed the orchestra—at least for plays. It is just possible to make out an orchestra conductor with violin players in the background. For cabarets and variety shows, the orchestra would have been on stage (see Chalker's sketch of this theatre and its extensive backstage facilities in Chapter 12: "Jolly Good Show!").

Roland ons kind

At long last, on 29 June, Wim Kan's three-act comedy, *Roland ons kind* (*Roland Our Child*) opened. Kan played the leading male role of Stephan Partos.

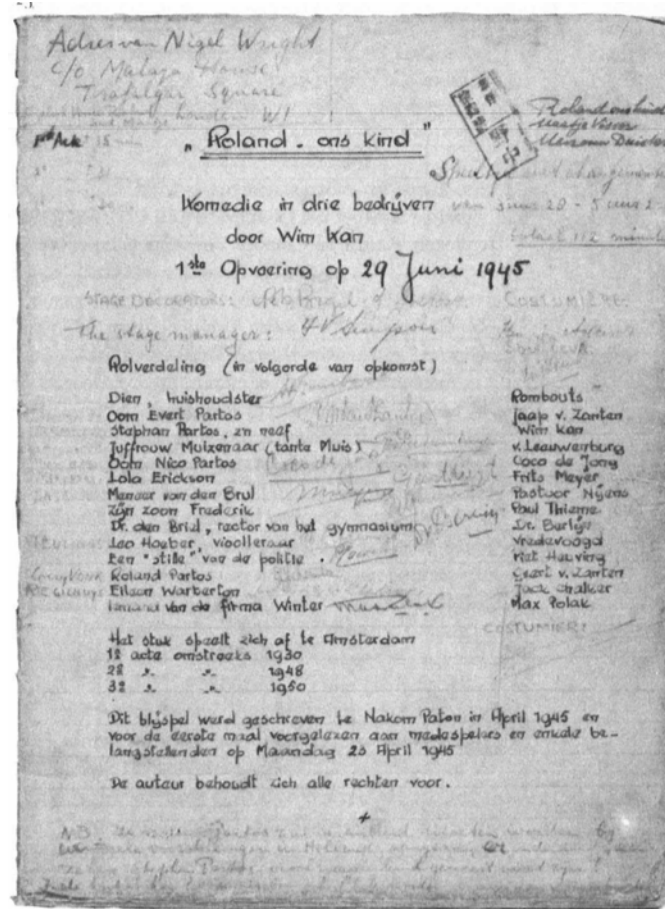


FIGURE 8.10. CAST LIST FOR *ROLAND ONS KIND* FROM WIM KAN'S *BURMADAGBOEK*. COURTESY OF FRANS RUHL.

The playbill above gives the complete cast list for the show, but it was obviously made up before Kan recast his female lead as it still shows Frits Meyer playing Lola Erickson instead of Lugt. Chalker is listed as playing Eileen Warburton, who was a young English violinist. Faint notes written in pencil on the program tell us that Rob Brazil was one of two men responsible for set decoration (which probably meant the settings as well), and a British POW named Simpson was the stage manager.

Played entirely in Dutch—except for Chalker’s brief scene—Kan’s play was an enormous success even with those who couldn’t understand a word of it, thus proving MacFarlane and Kan’s other critics wrong. “Even the English had to admit 1-0 for the Dutch,” Kan wrote jubilantly. “The best that was offered in the camp, etc.”⁸⁰

But Kan was not happy with his performance as Stephan; he thought the role didn’t suit him. So he asked Jack Chalker to take over his role in the English-language version—it would be Chalker’s first male role—and created a new walk-on role for himself as the “Man from Drages”: an estate agent trying to collect an overdue lease payment.⁸¹ He also sought help from the British players in producing the English version: “Tonight review translation with Jaap, Padri, Davidson and Nigel Wright. English language version of *Roland* has to open in 14 days.”⁸²



FIGURE 8.11. SKETCH OF WIM KAN, JACK CHALKER. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

At some point in their working relationship, Chalker drew this portrait sketch of Wim Kan. He had very fond memories of Kan and Wright as directors:

I can remember he and Nigel going over some of his drafts for plays with his Dutch friends and some of us connected with the theatre with a great deal of amusement—for he had great dry wit which was infectious. Both were sensitive and encouraging ‘teachers’ on the stage and I remember the quiet support they gave to us amateur actors both in rehearsal and during production.⁸³

When the next two weeks were suddenly given over to an original musical comedy, *Yes! Mr. Barry*, written and produced by Ted Ingram, Kan was given an unexpected reprieve in his deadline for the English-language production. *Roland* would now not have to open until 27 July. Ingram claimed he had written his whole show by moonlight when he was supposed to be asleep.⁸⁴ In this production, Jack Chalker played the female lead, Irene Kay, opposite Ingram as Mr. Barry.⁸⁵



FIGURE 8.12. SOUVENIR PROGRAM COVER FOR *YES! MR. BARRY*.
COURTESY OF FRED RANSOME SMITH. IWM MISC 90 ITEM 1323.

This large, brightly colored program for *Yes! Mr. Barry* was produced as a souvenir of the show by Fred “Smudger” Smith. It shows a beautiful starry-eyed young woman with long blonde curls wearing a bonnet and a cross on a chain around her neck—a late nineteenth century image of innocence. Or, after examining the contents of the playbill more closely, perhaps not!



FIGURE 8.13. PLAYBILL FOR *YES! MR. BARRY* BY FLIP RELF. IWM MISC 90 ITEM 1323.

Dutch artist Flip Relf drew a series of cartoons illustrating scenes from the musical as the playbill for this program. Given the content, you might suspect these were scenes from another production, except that the blond woman in the bonnet is at top center looking over these characters from another century.

The leaning lamppost in the lower left cartoon is an exact match for the one seen onstage in **Figure 8.9**, so it is very likely that what we see in that sketch is a scene from this production. Given the subject matter, a pregnant female character would be appropriate.

[To examine the playbill more closely and listen to an analysis of it, click on **Video Link 8.1**.]

Video



8.1

Two days after the opening, MacFarlane received a personal note from Chief Medical Officer Coates expressing his admiration for the show:

Please accept my congratulations on the excellent performance of your Theatrical Company yesterday, and convey to the Members of the Cast my sincere appreciation of their efforts.

In my opinion, it was the best show that has been staged in this Camp.⁸⁶

This note of appreciation from Coates, with its extravagant praise and emphasis on “your Theatrical Company,” may have had a political purpose as well. It may have been Coates’ way of helping restore MacFarlane’s injured ego and reputation after the ugliness of *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* incident.

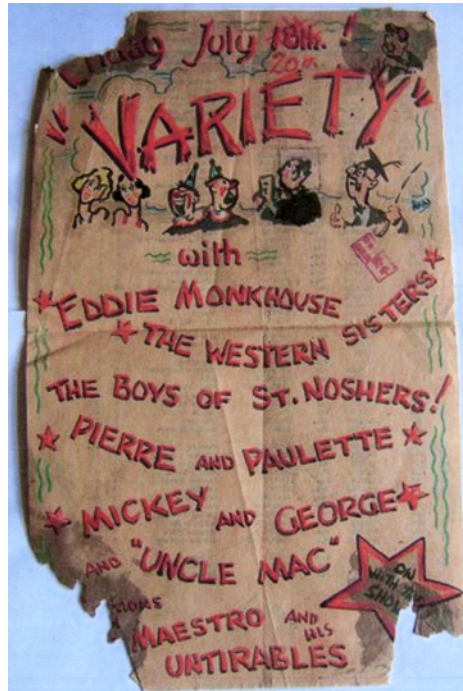


FIGURE 8.14. VARIETY SHOW POSTER.
COURTESY OF RICHARD BROWN.

On 20 July, a variety show starring Eddie Monkhouse appeared. Band Sergeant Bernard Brown, who played a cornet in “The Untirables,” preserved this poster of the show embellished with cartoons by “Akki” (Basil Akhurst). In the contrary way of British humor, the extremely slim Brown had been given the nickname, “Nosher”, by his comrades.^{xxi87} So “The Boys of St. Noshers!” act on the bill was probably performed by men from Brown’s own hut, as they would later present him with a specially commissioned cartoon by “Akki” in “appreciation for [his] ‘fatherly’ care” (see Chapter 11: “Out of the Blue Came Freedom”).^{xxii}

Camp Update: Plans for a Breakout

With the defeat of the I. J. A. Forces in Burma and the growing fear among the Japanese that the Allies would soon launch a major incursion into Thailand, Dunlop became aware of a serious escalation of tension in the camp. A Korean guard (identified in Dunlop’s diary only as “Z”) surreptitiously made contact with Dunlop and suggested there would be death marches and massacres if such an invasion of Thailand by the Allies occurred. Looking at the high embankment surrounding the camp with the machine gun emplacements facing in, Dunlop had to agree.⁸⁸ On 25 July, he initiated plans for a breakout as a defense against such dire possibilities as the only way to get a few POWs out to tell the real story of what had happened on the Thailand-Burma railway. Dunlop did not plan to be one of them—he would stay with his patients and with Colonel Coates.⁸⁹

^{xxi} According to his son, Richard, “he was always thin—even before captivity.”

^{xxii} Akhurst, like Norman Pritchard in Nong Pladuk, had trained as a draftsman before the war. In Changi and Nong Pladuk, at least, “Akki” had been one of the performers. Whether he produced cartoon images for other posters/programs in Nakhon Pathom prior to this point is not known, as very few of these artifacts have survived. With the shortage of paper, this poster was printed on the backside of the camp’s Nominal Roll.

Roland Our Child

Instead of opening on 27 July as expected, Kan's English-language version of *Roland* was delayed one more time—due to the rain, perhaps—and opened the next night instead. Playing opposite Jack Chalker in his leading role as Stephan Partos was Ken Adams as his wife, Lola Erickson. Others in the cast were Kenneth Cornish, who played their son, Roland, Nigel Wright as Uncle Ivan, and van Leeuwenberg, who had been retained from the Dutch-language production to relieve his role of Aunt Mole. And in what may have been a conciliatory gesture, but was also a cheeky bit of casting, Colonel MacFarlane was cast in a walk-on role as Bellows' injured son, Frederick. For this version, the nationality of Chalker's old role of Eileen Warburton had been changed. It was now Suzanne LaCoste, a young French woman violinist, played by D. Cameron (see full cast list in **Figure 8.15**).

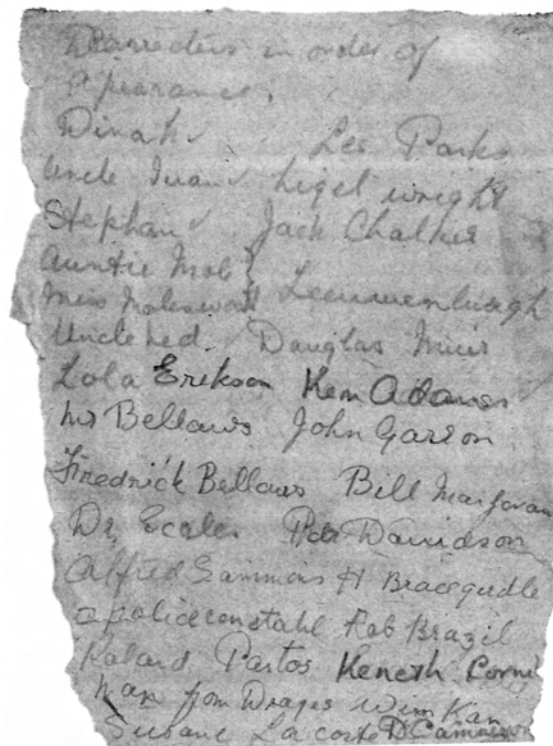


FIGURE 8.15. REMAINS OF CAST LIST FOR ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRODUCTION OF *ROLAND OUR CHILD*. COURTESY OF JACK CHALKER.

Nigel Wright was the producer-director for the English-language production.

The main plot outline and excerpts from *Roland Our Child* that follow are taken from Jack Chalker's copy of the English translation handwritten on thirty-six pages of a small notebook. Minor revisions made to the text during rehearsals are evident. It is not a complete script; it contains only Chalker's "sides"—the scenes in which he had dialogue and/or his "line cues" (several lines of dialogue given by other characters prior to his entrances). But since Chalker played the lead role of Stephan, we do have most of the text. For this English-language version, all the references to Dutch locales were changed to English ones. Instead of Amsterdam, for instance, the action takes place in London. As in the original, its three acts span three decades: Act I (1930), Act II (1948), Act III (1950).

Act I

Act I opens in the living room of Ivan Partos' home in London. Stephan Partos, a former child prodigy violinist, was raised by his two uncles (Ivan and Ned) and one aunt (Mole) after his parents died. All of them live off Stephan's earnings as a professional solo violinist. Now "nearly 27," Stephan no longer exhibits the talent he once had and his previous evening's recital has received terrible reviews in the morning's newspapers. In order to secure a financial future for the family, Uncle Ivan hatches a scheme for Stephan to marry another former child prodigy violinist, Lola Erickson, who is experiencing a similar loss of her virtuosic powers. By mixing their genes together, he believes, they would produce a child with the most amazing talent.

But when he broaches the idea to Stephan, Stephan is shocked by the crass suggestion. And when he learns that Uncle Ivan has sent a telegram to Lola asking her to come to the house that very day under the mistaken notion that he will arrange a concert booking for her, Stephan explodes, arguing with Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole as well as Uncle Ivan. Their argument is interrupted by Uncle Ivan, who, looking out the window, tells them that Lola's taxi has just drawn up outside. Stephan is encouraged to take a quick look at her out the window, and his immediate reaction is, "Damn it!! She's taller than I am – oh no! Not for me – I don't want to meet her." And he storms out, headed to his room.^{xxiii}

The brief scene of Lola's entrance and introduction to the family is not included in Chalker's script, as his character was not on stage, but it is fairly easy to figure out what transpires in it from the context. At some point, Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole leave to go get Stephan, and while Uncle Ivan is alone with Lola, he tells her that Stephan has an idea of how they both might secure their futures—by getting married and producing an infant who would inherit their combined talents and thus be a greater violinist than either one of them. Lola, like Stephan, is also offended by the idea and starts to leave. But at that very moment, Uncle Ned and Aunt Mole usher Stephan into the room. Lola makes excuses as to why she must leave immediately, but Stephan asks her to stay a moment longer as he has something to say to her. The others depart.

When Stephan and Lola are alone, Stephan convinces her that the idea of their arranged marriage was not his. Both agree categorically that they don't want to get married—and certainly not to a fellow musician! But as they continue talking, they begin to warm to each other's presence and soon find themselves sitting down beside each other on the couch. Comparing their careers as infant prodigies, Lola mentions the album of her past reviews she brought to the meeting at Uncle Ivan's request. Stephan indicates interest in taking a look at it and discovers it also contains photographs of Lola's childhood and family.

Stephan: *Who is that old gentleman?*

Lola: *That's grandpa, my mother's father. He was a positive tower of strength and muscle. When he was 82 years old he trained himself to climb Box Hill near Heathrow on his tricycle!*

Stephan: *Good Lord! Is he dead now?*

Lola: *Yes, alas! He was such a nice man, but a bit mad. One day we found him dead on his tricycle.*

Stephan [Laughs, then]: *– Oh, sorry.*

^{xxiii} In the original Dutch version the reference to Lola's height was an in-joke that must have delighted Kan's audience, as Kan was short in stature. That it is retained in the English-language version suggests that there may have also been a significant height difference between Chalker and Adams as well.

Lola: *Not at all! We used to laugh a lot about Grandpa. He was the laughing stock of the family.*

Stephan: *And you were the musical one of the family.*

As they continue to compare notes about their trials and tribulations as child prodigies, the notion that a marriage between them might produce a true prodigy on the violin surfaces once again.

Lola: *So you do agree with your Uncle's scheme after all?*

Stephan [frightened]: *Good heavens, no! How can you think that? I think it's a most immoral idea! But nevertheless if we could love each other and if we were to get married – have a son – then he might become a famous infant prodigy – That's so, isn't it?*

Lola: *I don't know . . . it's all so sudden. It sort of takes my breath away. It's a beautiful idea to live your own life all over again in the person of your child.*

Stephan: *And avoid all the mistakes which you and your parents made before.*

Lola: *Oh, I'm sure I could give my whole life to it. If it were a son I should call him . . .*

Stephan: *Roland?*

Lola: *Roland? Why Roland?*

Stephan: *I don't know, but there's something about it . . . To me it sounds a note of promise.*

Sparking off each other's ideas, they spin fantasies about the future.

Lola: *It's amazing, but all of a sudden I feel I can see him – now. He is rushing into the room, and flinging his arms round my neck and whispering in my ear, "Mummy, play something on your violin for me, will you?"*

Stephan: *He is still very young, though. A small boy of 5 or 6 at the most – but when he is 9 I can see him sitting between us in the Queen's Hall – the last tones of the music have died away & I say to him, "Come on Roland, we must go home" – and when I look at him, he has big tears in his eyes . . .*

Lola: *And later still when he is playing at his first recital – we are together – one of the vast applauding audience – and Roland stands alone – stern – but quite steady on the platform – He makes his bow to the audience – applause . . . look, look, he waves to us! He is smiling at us!*

Stephan: *And we take each other's hand [takes Lola's hand], and whisper softly – Roland, our child!*

Lola [looks inquiringly at Stephan]: – *Could that be true? Roland . . . our child?*

Curtain

Act II

Act II opens eighteen years later in 1948. The setting has now become the living room in Stephan and Lola's home. Their marriage has produced a child, Roland, who is now sixteen. As planned, Roland has been taking violin lessons and Lola and Stephan have the highest hopes for his—and their—future. What follows is a series of short scenes that totally undermine that illusion. First, a Mr. Bellows and his son, Frederick, arrive. Bellows tells them that Roland has recently beat up his son, giving him a broken arm and head lacerations. This is followed by another arrival, Mr. Simmons, Roland's violin teacher, who informs them that Roland hasn't appeared for his lessons for two months. And finally, a police constable appears who notifies them that Roland has been cited for performing acrobatic stunts on a bicycle along the busy Edgeware Road. Lola and Stephan categorically deny that this miscreant could be their son.

But the constable has brought Roland along with him. When confronted with these accusations, Roland admits that he fought Bellows' son because he was stealing his girl; that instead of attending his violin lessons he used the money to buy a racing bike; and that he did indeed race along Edgeware Road. To top it off, Roland takes this opportunity to inform his parents that he has never had any interest in being a violinist—that was their plan for his life, not his. Instead, he plans on becoming a physical education instructor.

In the stunned silence that follows, everyone except Stephan, Lola, and Roland quickly vacate the room. After some stern words from Stephan that a career as physical education teacher is never going to happen, Roland is sent to his room. Devastated by these revelations, and seeing all their dreams for the future possibly vanish, Stephan and Lola search their memories for how Roland could have possibly come by his "craze for sports." Then Stephan realizes the connection.

Stephan: *But I remember only too well. On that very morning in this very room, and on this very sofa, when you showed me your photograph-album! Who was that man who still climbed Box Hill on a tricycle when he was 82? Who was that?*

Lola [shocked]: *Good Lord! Grandpa!*

Stephan: *Of course, Grandpa! Who was found dead on his tricycle. It's from him he gets this ridiculous sports-complex. It's going to ruin his whole career.*

Act III

Act III opens two years later in the same setting as Act II, but now all the living room furniture has been removed and it has been outfitted as a small gymnasium. This is Uncle Ivan's scheme to insure that Roland will earn his physical education degree within a year. Unbeknownst to Stephan, Uncle Ivan has leased the gym equipment from Drages' Estate Agency and given Stephan's name as the guarantor. Roland announces that he plans to go off for the weekend with a friend. Uncle Ivan confides to Stephan and Lola

that he believes Roland is secretly going off to meet Suzanne LaCoste, a young French violinist who has been making quite a splash in London recently. Confronted with this charge, Roland denies he is running off to see Suzanne, but does confess that what he and a friend are actually going to do is compete in the five-day National Bicycle Races in Wembley Stadium. Hearing this news, Stephan throws a fit: "But I can tell you - this is not going to happen save over my dead body!"

Roland counters that he has already signed a contract to compete in the race. Stephan replies, "The contract has no value whatever because you haven't come of age yet! I tell you it shall not happen!" It is just at this point that the man from Drages (Wim Kan) enters and tells Stephan that he must have the first payment on the lease of the gym equipment immediately or he will be forced to confiscate their home furnishings as payment. Not having the amount needed, Stephan and Lola are faced with the loss of all their possessions. In the hubbub that follows, Roland reveals that the contract he signed is for the exact amount needed to cover the lease payment. Desperate for the money, Stephan is forced to agree to Roland's participation in the race. With that guarantee, the estate agent leaves.

Uncle Ned enters and tells them that "a pretty girl is pacing up and down" in the hall. This is Suzanne LaCoste, whom Roland now announces he has invited to the house to meet his parents as he is determined to marry her. Following another shocked silence, Suzanne enters and is introduced, and an awkward scene ensues. Then, devising another of his clever schemes to resolve the impasse, Uncle Ivan calls the concert hall box office and secures seats for Stephan and Lola to attend Suzanne's violin recital that night. Everyone departs, leaving Stephan and Lola alone.

Stephan [after silence]: *And here we are, without a son, without a home, without a penny and the infant prodigy's rendering of Mendelssohn's violin concerto in E minor has turned into a gramophone record that's going to race round and round at an idiotic speed, never stopping, – for 5 days.*

Lola: *Birds fly from their nests and never ask the way. We have made the mistake of 1000's of other parents. We did not ask: "Child what do you want to become; how would you like to manage your own life?" No! We simply dictated – "our only son, your future career is this: – to increase the glory of the family." But we forgot that little children grow up, and one day they must shatter our castles in the air. We should still be grateful that it has all ended like this.*

Stephan: *But it's so very difficult to change over to a new ideal and still be enthusiastic.*

Lola: *Yet we shall have to, Stephan. It's his happiness that counts, not ours!*

Stephan: *But will Roland ever be happy living like this?*

Lola: *That's exactly what I've been thinking, Stephan. But why shouldn't he? His career will be one of physical development, of speed, muscle, and human strength; ours was of the intellect and the spirit. But what Roland may miss when he gets older, his wife can give him with her natural gifts for music. There's still time for him.*

Stephan: *You mean, that Roland will always be for us an infant prodigy?*

Lola: *Yes! Of course not as we have pictured him, but an infant prodigy according to his own rights.*

Stephan [thoughtfully]: *Roland, who becomes a teacher in 2 years time!*

Lola: *Roland, with his diploma for physical training –*

Stephan: *Roland – the star of the cycle race.*

Lola [looking at Stephan, asking]: *Roland – our child?*

Stephan [taking her hand]: *Roland, still our child!*⁹⁰

Curtain

Like its Dutch language predecessor, this production of *Roland Our Child* was an enormous success as well, finding resonance with its English-speaking audiences as it had with its Dutch. “Some Brits,” wrote Kan, “said I could earn a lot of money with the piece. ‘Such plays you see in the best theatres in London.’”⁹¹

Roland’s Relevance

What could possibly have been the significance of this comedy of ideas for Kan’s POW audience? The play opens in 1930—the past—a time in which the older men in his audience were also young men, like Stephan in Act I. The next two acts take place in the future (1948) and (1950). By this time the POWs will surely have been liberated and repatriated back to their homelands contemplating their own futures and families.^{xxiv} What did Kan want to say to his audience about their future?

Since Stephan is the main character, it is his conflict and its resolution that the audience becomes most aware of. So one possible reading of *Roland Our Child* is that it is a cautionary tale in which Kan warns the older members of his audience that when they return, they need to break free of the old societal values and expectations that bind them to the past in an attempt to control the future—just as Stephan is forced to do. And when “Grandpa’s genes” resurface in their children, as they certainly will in all their “positive strength and muscle,” the POWs must remember to ask their offspring Lola’s question: “Child, what do you want to become; how would you like to manage your own life?”

For those younger POWs in the audience, who may have identified more with Roland, the message is the same, only more urgent. If the years of captivity have taught them anything, it should be that when they return to “civvy street,” they must claim their right to determine their own futures.

The Critical Moment

Meanwhile, events offstage were quickly moving from bad to worse. The only entries in Dunlop’s diary during the first week of August 1945 concern the deteriorating camp situation and the puzzling arrival and departure of Red Cross stores. In the midst of the growing crisis—and seemingly unaware that the drama being played out on the world stage was moving quickly toward its climax—Kan noted in his diary on 6 August that he has started rehearsals for a production of his “almost a farce,” *Maatje*.⁹²

On 13 August, Dunlop learns—again through “Z”—that the Russians have entered the war and the

^{xxiv} *The Second World War is never mentioned in the play, but its purposeful absence makes it all the more present as a context in which to understand Kan’s meaning.*

Allies have given an ultimatum to Japan.⁹³ The POWs fate now hung in the balance.

The next day Kan records that Jack Chalker had drawn a nice poster for *Maatje*, which hung in the canteen as an advertisement for its upcoming opening on the seventeenth.⁹⁴ Dunlop's diary entry for the same date described the secret plans he had made—not for a breakout as contemplated earlier—but for a quick takeover of the camp if the possibility of a Japanese surrender became a reality.⁹⁵

On 15 August, Dunlop made a quick note that all was in readiness for the takeover—but added that there were credible rumors the war might be over.⁹⁶

The following day was 16 August—and the war *was* over.

Endnotes

- 1 Flower, 246.
- 2 Dunlop, 412.
- 3 Chalker, BRA, 104.
- 4 Dunlop, 411.
- 5 Kan, Diary, 24 June 1944.
- 6 Chalker, "War Diary" extracts, Sheet 2.
- 7 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 8 Donald Smith, 152.
- 9 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 10 Norman Smith, 49–50.
- 11 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 12 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 13 Gibson, Memoir, 9.
- 14 Kan, Diary, 26 October 1944.
- 15 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 16 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 17 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 18 Gibson, Letter, 22 May 2004; Norman Smith, 51.
- 19 Gibson, Memoir, 8.
- 20 Norman Smith, 58.
- 21 Dunn, 139.
- 22 Gibson, Memoir, 11.
- 23 Gibson, Memoir, 11.
- 24 Dunlop, 421.
- 25 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 26 Margie Bellamy, "Comment on text," E-mail, 17 July 2008.
- 27 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 28 Dunlop, 423.
- 29 Dunlop, 423.
- 30 Translation of notice by Margie Samethini Bellamy.
- 31 Kan, Diary, 6 December 1944.
- 32 Norman Smith, 60.
- 33 Barnard, 154.
- 34 Ingram, 2.
- 35 Dunlop, 427.
- 36 Composite sources: Norman Smith, 53; Chalker, Letter, 3 April 2000.

- 37 Norman Smith, 52–53.
- 38 Norman Smith, 52–53.
- 39 Evers, 68.
- 40 Chalker, BRA, 116–117.
- 41 Chalker, BRA, 116.
- 42 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 43 Chalker, Letter 2 March 2000.
- 44 Dunn, 136.
- 45 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 46 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 47 Ingram, 1.
- 48 Brazil, Letter, 16 October 2000.
- 49 Brazil, Letter, 29 October 2000.
- 50 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 51 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 52 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 53 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 54 Chalker, Letter, 24 July 2000.
- 55 Fred Ransome Smith, Letter, n.d. [2011].
- 56 Dunlop, 425.
- 57 Chalker, Letter, 7 October 2005.
- 58 Gibson, Memoir, 12.
- 59 Gibson, Letter, 22 May 2004.
- 60 Gibson, Memoir, 12.
- 61 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 62 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3; Letter, 3 April and 24 July 2000.
- 63 Kan, Diary, 3 May and 6 May 1945.
- 64 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 3.
- 65 Kan, Diary, 6 May 1945.
- 66 Kan, Diary, 20 May 1945.
- 67 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 68 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 69 Chalker, BRA, 114.
- 70 Chalker, Diary, 18 May 1945.
- 71 Kan, Diary, 27 May 1945.
- 72 Kan, Diary, 27 May and 3 June 1945.
- 73 Kan, Diary, 3 June 1945.
- 74 Kan, Diary, 10 June 1945.
- 75 Kan Diary, 17 June 1945.
- 76 Kan, Diary, 17 June 1945.
- 77 Kan Diary, 25 June 1945.
- 78 Chalker, Letter, 2 March 2000.
- 79 Ingram, 2.
- 80 Kan, Diary, 30 June 1945.
- 81 Kan Diary, 25 July 1945.
- 82 Kan, Diary, 30 June 1945.
- 83 Chalker, Letter, 23 June 2003.
- 84 Ingram, 2.
- 85 Chalker, “War Diary” extracts, Sheet 4.
- 86 IWM Misc. 90 Item 1323.
- 87 Richard Brown, E-mail to author, 6 August 2011.

- 88 Dunlop, 432.
- 89 Dunlop, 433.
- 90 Kan, *Roland* English trans., 1–36.
- 91 Kan, Diary, 1 August 1945.
- 92 Kan, Diary, 6 August 1945.
- 93 Dunlop, 433–434.
- 94 Kan, Diary, 14 August 1945.
- 95 Dunlop, 434.
- 96 Dunlop, 434.